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SUBJECT: FRANCE'S REFERENDUM ON CONSTITUTION: NOTHING

CERTAIN WITH A WEEK TO GO

REF: PARIS 3342 AND PREVIOUS

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) With a week to go before France's May 29 referendum on the proposed constitution for the EU, the outcome remains highly uncertain. Latest polls, taken in mid-May, show 'no' with a slight lead over 'yes' among decided voters. Pollsters, however, are careful to point out that the number of undecided and hesitant voters remains high (about 20 percent of those likely to vote). The debate over the proposed constitution is galvanizing public attention, with most pollsters predicting a high turn-out (as high as 70 percent of registered voters). In its final straightaway the race is coming down to a contest between two emotion-driven sets of issues. The core strength of 'no' is anger at elites of both left and right and fear of economic displacement driven by globalization and EU enlargement. The core strength of 'yes' is hope that Europe can bring a better future (including helping France cope with globalization) and patriotism -- supporting France's leading role in the European construction. END SUMMARY.

POLLSTERS HEDGE THEIR BETS

2. (SBU) Current polls -- most taken in mid-May -- reflect that, among decided voters, 'no' holds a slight lead over 'yes.' All these polls show 'no' at below 55 percent and 'yes' at above 45 percent, with between 15 and 30 percent of likely voters listed as undecided. According to Eric Dupin, a leading commentator on polls and journalist at the economic daily "Les Echos," French pollsters systematically exaggerate the number of "hesitant and undecided" in order to hedge the predictive value of their polls. According to Dupin, respondents are quite firm in their feelings and opinions, and in the proportions indicated by current polls. But the polls' accurate reflection of the distribution of views across the electorate does not reflect how likely different segments of this electorate are to go to the polls on referendum day to express their convictions. Polltakers have found that respondents tend to overstate their likelihood of voting, since it is embarrassing to admit (even to a polltaker) that one won't be bothering to vote.

3. (SBU) Pierre Giacometti, director of the IPSOS polling organization, follows up this line of argument in insisting that the profiles/demographics of voter groups are key to turnout, and therefore to final results on referendum day. For example, Giacometti believes that the psychological profile of many 'no' supporters -- those who are alienated more than angry, resentful of the whole system and despondent about their own economic prospects -- makes it likely that many will not bother to go to the polls. While, again in Giacometti's view, the voter group that supports the proposed Constitution by the largest margin (older voters and by a two-thirds majority), are also the group likely to have the highest rate of participation. Without backing away from their poll results -- that 'no' is in the lead -- pollsters are also exceedingly careful to point out that they really don't have good predictive indicators of what the results will be May 29.

"OFFICIAL" CAMPAIGN -- MEDIA BLITZ FOR AN ATTENTIVE PUBLIC

4. (SBU) The "official campaign" -- operationally, government financing of TV time for advocacy activities by political parties -- began May 16. It features a salvo of ads that bracket the prime time newscasts of France's state-supported networks. Overall, the major parties favor 'yes' and the minor parties favor 'no' -- and there is no equal time for the key 'no' camp, "dissident" socialist party sympathizers. In past weeks books about the proposed constitution have been selling briskly throughout France. The high level of interest this reveals among the book-reading public is now permeating the portion of the public more likely to get their information exclusively from

television.

15. (SBU) The most effective of these ads, those concocted by televisual professionals for the largest parties -- the center right Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) and the center-left Socialist Party (PS) -- are pro-'yes' and aimed at swaying the undecided. Supporters of 'no,' particularly those affiliated with these major parties, have been intent on denouncing this "state-sponsored propaganda campaign," in part because they fear that, as it builds up, it will be effective, cutting into the lead of 'no' in the last days of the campaign. From the beginning of the campaign, party leaders in particular and the political class in general have underestimated the depth of popular dissatisfaction with their leadership and France's economic situation. If the campaign finale's media blitz comes up short in bringing around just enough undecided voters to overreach the high tide of 'no,' they will have underestimated again.

DIVISIONS ON LEFT AND RIGHT -- PREVIEW OF 2007

16. (SBU) The end of the referendum campaign is starkly highlighting the deep splits on both center-left and center-right. These differences, essentially clashing visions of what the constitution should do for France and how Europe should evolve should it be adopted -- will persist as defining differences among candidates and party factions in the run-up to the 2007 presidential campaign. On the center-right: UMP president Nicolas Sarkozy highlights how the constitution will help bring needed change to France, providing a context for more opportunity, prosperity and successful adaptation to globalization. President Chirac stresses that the constitution provides for continuity -- continued protection for the institutions that sustain France's social model and continued support for France's traditional leadership role in Europe. On the center left: PS National Secretary Francois Hollande has made adopting the constitution in order to engage in the political struggle for a "social Europe" the centerpiece of his pro-'yes' campaign. Former Socialist Prime Minister Laurent Fabius insists that an objective assessment of the text of the constitution in view of the economic heterogeneity of the 25-country union makes for a European construction deleterious to the long-term interests of ordinary Frenchmen and women.

COMMENT

17. (SBU) One area where there is general agreement is that the strength of anti-constitution sentiment, particularly among center-left voters, is due to the persistence and depth of ordinary Frenchmen and women's anger at their country's political and business elites and fear of an expanded Europe and globalization. It remains to be seen to what extent these emotions will motivate these voters to turn out and vote 'no' on May 29. Hope that an expanded Europe (so unlike that which the French public has traditionally supported) can bring a better future, along with patriotism (confidence that France is up to the challenge of leading in this new Europe) are the counter-emotions that could motivate just enough voters to bring about a 'yes' victory on referendum day. END COMMENT.

WOLFF